



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

XXIV.—POETRY, PHILOSOPHY, AND RELIGION.

Some thirty years ago, Matthew Arnold, in one of those magnificently cumulative passages with which he so loved to dazzle his readers, said of the future of poetry: "The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, when it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact, and now the fact is failing it. Poetry, on the other hand, attaches its emotion to the idea, the idea *is*¹ the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry."

A generation has passed since this prediction was made, a generation during which religion seems more than ever to have fallen into disuse, and poetry, at least latterly, to have become a lost art. Whether in that great body of poetry which has come down to us our race has found 'an ever surer and surer stay' would be difficult to determine. Statistics fail to show how many English readers have substituted Shakspeare for the Bible, and Wordsworth for the Prayer Book. But is the nature of poetry such that it is capable of becoming a substitute for religion? Coleridge once stated that "every poet, when he is a great poet, is also a great philosopher," and since every religion, however crude, has its philosophical aspects,—though religion is always more than philosophy,—this remark of Coleridge's offers a convenient approach to the issue raised by Arnold.

Poetry is unique among the arts, for the sensuous medium

¹ The italics are Arnold's.

of poetry is language, the natural vehicle of thought. For this reason poetry is able to present ideas of greater complexity than can any other art, and of developing such ideas more fully. The Divine Comedy is wider-reaching in its intellectual scope than any single painting, statue, symphony, or monument of architecture. Poetry, moreover, appeals to the understanding more directly than does any other art. To be susceptible to the full significance of the Sistine Madonna, one must be acquainted with the Christ Story. In a word, then, poetry touches human life at more points than does any other art, and may be more directly applicable. But to touch life at all points, and to be directly applicable would seem also to be the ideal of philosophy. Is not Coleridge right, then, and must it not be admitted that he only is a great poet who is likewise a great philosopher?

If the term 'philosopher' is to be taken in its widest possible meaning, this would indeed be true. Whenever a man directs his attention to the general problems of life, he is, for the time being, a philosopher. Thus, poetry which concerns itself with life,—and all poetry concerns itself more or less closely with life, must, as Arnold said, be criticism of life,—will, in this general sense be philosophy. But here the analogy stops. Not all thought concerning life will prove to be true when tested by life as seen in its larger aspects. Much philosophy-poetry when thus tested will fail, but it will fail only as philosophy. It will not therefore fail also as poetry. Coleridge himself said of philosophy, "The office of philosophical disquisition consists in just distinction." But he would have been the last to say that 'just distinction' was the office of poetry. Indeed, it is evident that Coleridge regarded philosophy much as we regard it to-day,—as the attempt, rigorously pursued, to find in the data of experience a principle, or principles, which shall enable us to give order to the knowledge gained by experience, and to

find in that order a reading of the universe. In a word, the hope of philosophy is to furnish us with what the Germans, with their genius for compounding words, so happily call a *Weltanschauung*. Certainly, however, it is not the function of poetry to provide a logically consistent *Weltanschauung*. That the poet who could do this under the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty would be great, no one would deny. But to reason from this, and to say that one's final estimate of poetry is to be based upon the adequacy of the philosophy it advances, would mean that the final estimate of poetry is to be based on standards which lie outside of poetry itself. The art which cannot find within itself the canons of its own criticism, is not art, but something else. But let the method be admitted, if only to see whither it leads.

If poetry is to be judged by the *Anschauung* it presents, then the greater part of what English-speaking peoples have been accustomed to regard as poetry is not poetry at all. Few of our greatest dramas could be called poetry, and none of our ballads. Dante, on this hypothesis, becomes, *Q. E. D.*, the only really great poet; while Shakspeare will fall far below Wordsworth, and Omar Khayyám. Yet some there are who venture to think Shakspeare fairly great, although his philosophy, when there is any, is mainly Positivism, and Positivism, denying, as it does, the possibility of a *Weltanschauung*, is, strictly speaking, no philosophy at all! Even if it be granted that Dante is the supreme poet, it certainly is not because of his *Anschauung*, that of Scholasticism, and the Mediæval Church,—one which for many of us to-day is already inadequate.

And now all that has been said of the relation of poetry to philosophy will hold true also of poetry and religion,—the *Anschauung* is again in the way. One cannot escape the fact that a religion must offer *some* view of reality. A religion may, indeed, lack a conception of God, yet there is no religion,

however primitive, which fails entirely either to offer some explanation of existence, or to designate personages or forces as objects of worship. In the primitive community, because of its limitations, it might indeed happen that poetry, for sheer lack of imaginative extension, would be forced to occupy itself with religious material. But the poetry of civilization should not be called upon to attempt the solution of the complex problems of its various religions. Still less would one care to assert that the multiple phenomena of repentance, conversion, redemption, and the like, were the most desirable subjects poetry could find, although poetry would not be debarred from utilizing these at its pleasure. But such poetic achievement would have to be judged as poetry, not by the criteria of religion. On the side of content, poetry cannot be identified either with philosophy or with religion. Yet the men whose opinions have been cited were poets of no inconsiderable power, one of whom possessed keen metaphysical insight, and the other, although disagreeing with accepted religious dogma, deep religious feeling. There is no one among English poets whose religious craving is so everywhere brought out as is Matthew Arnold's. *Dover Beach* could have been written only by a profoundly religious man, albeit a man whose religious yearnings had been eternally disappointed. Surely these poets either saw or felt some underlying, some perhaps generally hidden, connection between poetry and philosophy, and between poetry and religion. Is the connection one that can be analyzed?

In the first place, the relationship is twofold: on the one hand creative; on the other, appreciative. It is the poet only who experiences it on the creative side; all of us may feel it through appreciation. Creatively, then, there is affinity between poetry, philosophy, and religion, for the impulse to philosophize, and to postulate religious ultimates, is, in its final analysis, one with the impulse towards poetic creation.

The philosopher who is busy about the universe has but one end in view, to bring a seeming chaos into order by discovering those laws by which it may be rationalized and harmonized. To do this, he first must analyze the universe, and then resynthesize the results of his analysis. Coleridge pointed this out in the passage quoted from above. After saying that the office of philosophical disquisition consists in just distinction, he continues: "In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical process of philosophy. But having done so, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity in which they actually coexist; and this is the result of philosophy." But we must go yet a step further. The philosopher is himself a part of this order which he has established, he is in harmony with it.

More important still, it is a part of him, of his larger self. It is his will that has created it, and although his will has worked, not arbitrarily, but under the restrictions of logic, so that he is, as it were, but the lesser god which has carried out the work of forces larger than himself, nevertheless, since he is the one who, to use Coleridge's phrase, has "restored the conceptions to the unity in which they actually coexist," his relation to his world is that of a creator to his creation. Furthermore, he takes a certain kind of satisfaction in this world of his, for however much he might have liked, for moral reasons, say, to have been able to restore his conceptions to a unity of different internal arrangements, the fact that it is as it must have been, that it could not have been otherwise, is for him, when he regards himself as creator, completely satisfying. Pythagoras might have preferred, for purely extraneous reasons, to have found that the square on the hypotenuse should have been equal to something other than the squares of the other two sides; but his mathematical

will was completely satisfied when the result gave evidence on the face of it that it could only be so, and not different.

Just so with the religious man. To yearn after religious comfort, is to yearn for harmony with a principle outside of life, superimposed upon life, inclusive of all life; a principle that shall furnish a focal point on which all thinking can converge, an ultimate locus of human aspiration. There would seem, however, to be a slight difference between philosophy and religion, for a man is likely to regard his religious doctrines more or less in the light of revelation. But this offers no difficulty to the discussion. Philosophy becomes religion when the process is disregarded and the mind reposes upon the result. A religion is but philosophy until this repose is achieved. The only difference between the two is a difference in the nature of the faith demanded by philosophy and by religion. A man's faith in revelation rests upon extraneous grounds; the philosopher, like the mathematician, can demonstrate the bases of his confidence in the result. The logical results of philosophy, then, irrespective of their quality, may stand in the same relation to the human mind as the divine revelations of religion. This identity of relation, perhaps better, of function, irrespective of identity of content, is all that needs to be established. Thus it is that the religious man finds in his religion, and the philosopher in his philosophy, a peace that the world cannot give. The world is fragmentary, experience requires always a Beyond to make the experience complete,—it is the flower in the crannied wall. The ideals of philosophy and of religion are final, beyond them there is no Beyond. The strict Calvinist may not have enjoyed the prospect of Hell, but he could rejoice in being damned for the glory of God.

Now all that has been said of philosophy and of religion is likewise true of poetry, true in kind, at least, if not in degree. On the creative side, the poet is one with the

philosopher in that he gives to experience,—to imaginative experience, that is,—harmony, organization. For the time being, he is at work in a little world of his own, a world over which he is the ruling genius, one which he brings to order out of chaos, one which he is engaged in articulating. But his world may not be arbitrary, any more than the world of the philosopher may be arbitrary; for every work of art must show on the face of it why it is so and not otherwise, else it is not art. If the poet is master of his imagination, nothing which ought to have come into the ordered world of his poem will have been left out; nothing which ought to have been left out will have been brought in. The order will be perfect, the articulation complete.

It is in this consent of our æsthetic will to the will of the artist that the parallel of poetry with philosophy and with religion will be found to lie. The satisfaction the mind derives from the contemplation of any view of life to which it gives its consent, and the repose it finds in religious faith, are identical in essence with the satisfaction with which the mind is filled when it yields itself to the spell of poetry. To be sure, we gain much from philosophy and from religion besides mere æsthetic satisfaction; we are roused by them to many sorts of intellectual and moral activities. And we may gain from poetry also more than mere æsthetic satisfaction. But, and here is the point which requires emphasis,—the element which is common to all three, is, not a coincidence of content, but this capacity for satisfying the æsthetic demand,—the demand, namely, that the object towards which our mind is directed shall require nothing outside itself for completion. We are satisfied æsthetically with an object when we are in harmony with it, when we can feel that had we willed it to come into existence we should have willed it to be just so and not otherwise. Thus the philosopher who is convinced of the finality of his reading of life, wills

life to be in harmony with that view; he is in æsthetic accord with his *Weltanschauung*. And the truly religious man is æsthetically in harmony with his religion, for, by submitting to what he regards as the will of God, he wills with God, so that, even if he be obliged thus to will his own destruction, there is for him satisfaction in that very act of will.

We have now worked out a theory which can withstand the tests before which the theory of identity through coincidence of content broke down. We can be in æsthetic accord with any poem whatsoever, irrespective of the content. The philosophy of the ballad may be the most naïve; from the drama, religion may be entirely lacking; yet should I be inclined to will both the one and the other, then are they, at least for me, identical with philosophy and a substitute for religion, for my philosophical and my religious instincts, in so far as these are æsthetic instincts, have been satisfied.

So much, then, for the æsthetic parallel. In one other respect, also, are poetry, philosophy, and religion comparable,—in certain aspects all three are non-temporal.

It is difficult for the man of affairs to free himself from the bondage of time, for the reason that he is engaged his life long in observing those changes upon which his very existence depends; and change is the essence of time. But the mathematician, the logician, the philosopher, the man who can lose himself in religious contemplation, the artist,—all these soon come to realize that their relation to the object is essentially non-temporal. The truth of the Pythagorean proposition, for instance, is an eternal truth,—not because it can never be demonstrated false, but because it is non-temporal. To speak of it in terms of time would be a proceeding that would have no meaning. The manuscript of the poem may perish in to-morrow's fire; by to-morrow we may ourselves be no more. But if the poem was æsthetically a

true poem, then its truth was an eternal truth. And our relation to the poem, because it was one of æsthetic consent, was an eternal, because non-temporal, relationship. Browning's *Old Pictures in Florence* is interesting as the product of an artist and philosopher who was not sufficiently either philosopher or artist quite to see this non-temporal aspect of art. The reason is evident, Browning was ever an ethical teacher, and morality belongs to time. When he writes of works of art,

"They stand for our copy, and once invested
With all they can teach, we shall see them abolished,"

he fails to realize that these, in their perfection, possess an eternality in the light of which his desire for a continuity of tumultuous existence is all but vulgar.

Life, in its final analysis, is will, for without will there would be no life. If, then, poetry, philosophy and religion can bring complete satisfaction to the will, then is that relationship non-temporal, for there is in the relationship nothing to mark change. If change is to occur, it must come from without, it cannot originate either in the object itself or in our relation to the object. Yet the mood so induced is far from being one of mere quiescence; it may be contemplative, but it is impassioned contemplation. It is a mood when, as Wordsworth says,

"we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul;
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy
We see into the life of things."

Poetry, then, may, purely by accident, have a philosophical or a religious content, but it is one both with philosophy and religion only because our attitude towards each is, in part at least, the æsthetic attitude, and because all three satisfy,

at least in a measure, the æsthetic demand. Obviously, however, poetry is not alone capable of satisfying this demand. Coleridge and Arnold found the parallelism in poetry because, being themselves poets, they could feel it in poetry when they could not feel it in the other arts. But the musician who cannot endure poetry, and the painter who cannot appreciate music, feels it, each in his own art. It is because the medium of poetry is language that the matter has become confused. It is the common purpose of the arts to bring order out of chaos, and to make real to the finite imagination of man that which is, in its essence, non-temporal. Poetry, therefore, can be identified with philosophy and with religion only in so far as all art can be so identified. Keats alone has been wholly right:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

PERCY ADAMS HUTCHISON.